



Early in 1919, a young Naval Aviator predicted that trans-oceanic flight was ‘a perfectly safe and sane commercial proposition, not a gigantic gamble.’*

The U.S.Navy NC-4 proved how right he was with

THE FIRST FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

BY COMMANDER TED WILBUR



AY 17, 1919, started off as a bleak day on the Islands of the Vultures. With classical whaling, Nantucket-style, one of their chief industries, the inhabitants of the Portuguese Azores were long accustomed to watching the sea. To this day, upon the lush green slopes and mountainsides are watchers' huts, shelters for the anxious eyes that seek a wispy spout. Poised below, among the rocks of black sand bights, whalers wait, boats and harpoons at the ready, eager for the signal that monsters are at hand. Now radio is used, but back then, once the telltale plume was spotted, fires were ignited in line with where the prey was seen to "blow."

But on that morning 50 years ago, there were no guiding lights; the mid-Atlantic pinnacles were misty with the shrouds of fog. Along rocky promontories, drizzle pierced low-lying clouds. A murky, thickening overcast had settled on the archipelago and, for a whale watcher, prospects of sighting blue-gray beasts were dim indeed.

Before noon, visibility on the island of Fayal was reduced to one or two miles. A west wind swept foggy blankets onto the southern shores, while turbulent air, spilling down from the mountains, created a sporadic breeze along the coast. There, on the Bay of Praia, shortly after 11:00 A.M., a strange sighting was made.

*Ensign Juan Terry Trippe, later the founder of Pan American World Airways.

Observers on the beach said it started with a sound, a growing hum, a growling noise from seaward. As they peered toward Joao Diaz Point, suddenly from out of the gloom, slicing across the waters, came a huge gray shape: a whale-like body seemingly attached to burnished appendages that flickered dully in the half-light. Wallowing in an arcing turn, the “monster” barked, sputtered, then emitted a tremendous roar and, as quickly as it had appeared, faded away in a sound of thunder.

As startled farmers and fishermen hastened from the scene, never again to experience so fantastic a sight, 20,000 pounds of wood, metal, fabric and fuel were plunging into the damp air and making round the next peninsula. Just beyond, in the harbor of Fayal’s capital city, Horta, lay the warship, USS Columbia. At 11:23 an entry was made in the ship’s log:

SIGHTED NC-4 ABREAST ESPALAMACA POINT

A quivering wake spread across the Bay of Praia, mute testimony that for the first time an aircraft had flown from the American continent to a European shore.

History books say little. Airplanes take off, they land, successfully or otherwise. What makes a dramatic tale is conflict, difficulties, accidents and, perhaps, even failure. Of these, the saga of the NC-4 and Seaplane Division One delivers up full measure. Overshadowed by reason of its proximity to the end of World War I and subsequent milestone flights, the flight is a bare statistic in the record books. In spite of the fact that the trans-Atlantic race was an epic involving thousands of men and scores of ships and that it was one of the most thoroughly photographed and documented events of its time, there are now few to be found aware of its heartbreaks, setbacks, tragedies and eventual significance.

Some years later, in speaking of his famous solo flight to Paris, Charles Lindbergh said “I had a better chance of reaching Europe in the Spirit of St. Louis than the NC boats had of reaching the Azores. I had a more reliable type of engine, improved instruments and a continent instead of an island for a target. It was skill, determination and a hard-working crew that carried the NC-4 to the completion of the fast trans-Atlantic flight.”

Many of the men who were directly involved with the project continued to pursue adventurous and successful careers. Some are still with us today. But perhaps most remarkable is the fact that now, on the fiftieth anniversary of the historic flight, the original NC-4 aircraft is on view to the public. The 126-foot giant, recently restored to mint condition by the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, is once again on display in Washington, D.C. — a tribute to an American achievement and to the men who built and flew her.

